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SUBJECT: EXPO NAJAF DRAWS SUPPORT FROM SHI,A CLERICS,
GENERATES PRAISE FOR PRT

Classified By: Greta Holtz, OPA Director, for Reasons 1 (b) and (d)

11. (U) This is a Najaf PRT reporting cable.

12. (U) SUMMARY. PRT members attended the October 12 opening session of Expo Najaf organized and hosted by the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and the Najaf Chamber of Commerce. The event was organized with the explicit support of their spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Bashir Al Najafi. Two keynote speakers thanked the PRT publicly for its support to the Chamber of Commerce and Najaf reconstruction. END SUMMARY.

13. (U) PRT attended the October 12 opening of Expo Najaf, a two-day business conference organized by the Small Business Development Center (SBDC). SBDC is a joint project between the Najaf Chamber of Commerce and USAID/Tijara. The event was held with the support of Grand Ayatollah Bashir Al Najafi. SBDC invited the PRT to attend the conference, during which speakers publicly praised the PRT and USAID for their support of the Najaf business community. Speakers included the Minister of Transportation, Najaf PC Chair Sheikh Fayed Al Shimeri, Grand Ayatollah Bashir Al Najafi's son Ali Bashir Al Najafi, Kufa University President Dr. Razak al Issa. The event received significant media attention, including coverage by al Sharq al-Aussat and Asuat Al Iraq, both of which interviewed the PRT Team Leader.

14. (C) Initially, the PRT was discouraged from attending. With Governor Zurfi out of Najaf until October 25, First Deputy Governor Razaq Mushin Sharif, a Sadr ally, had been asked to represent the Provincial Government and promptly told the SBDC to disinvite USG participants. Instead of agreeing to this demand, the Chamber of Commerce asked Provincial Council Chair Sheikh Fayed to represent the province. Sharba, who recently returned from the U.S. as a member of a Najaf-Minneapolis sister-city delegation, noted that not only the Chamber, but also participating Indian businessmen, wanted to see our participation at the event.

15. (C) COMMENT. This event was held with the explicit support of Grand Ayatollah Bashir al Najafi, with his son representing him on the dais. In giving media play to PRT attendance, and public thanks for U.S. support, the Najaf Chamber of Commerce made clear it is interested in expanding its international relationships, including with the United States. END COMMENT

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